THREE BY BECKETT

L.A. Actors Theatre, Hollywood

Samuel Beckett hits Hollywood? Yes: Rockaby, Ohio Impromptu, and Footfalls were expertly done by the L.A. Actors Theatre, a small off-off Sunset group directed by Alan Mandell. Perhaps the reason this dramatic trilogy was performed so flawlessly--with the attention to every pause and eye blink that these recent miniatures demand--is that the cast was not new to Beckett drama. Beatrice Manley had played Winnie, and Bea Silvern had appeared in Not I and Embers. Mandell, the actor/director who was involved in the San Quentin production of Godot and who recently acted for Beckett in Endgame, has a face almost as lined and arresting as Beckett's own. He plays the reader in Ohio Impromptu with a deep, "once upon a time" resonant voice, and directs all three plays with more human emotion, more shades of grey, less monotone than we are wont to see in Beckett drama.

For Rockaby, Mandell followed the stage directions to the last echo (getting more detailed instructions from Beckett by mail), and added a subtle sense of regression. In straight backed rocker with a footrest, (Woman, played by Beatrice Manely) achieved the knees-at-right-angle position Beckett implies for this vignette and also uses in Still (a similar piece in prose depicting a seated man awaiting another "close of day"). W's "famished eyes" must gaze unblinkingly for much of the play and Beatrice Manley manages to make her eyes look famished, brilliant, and endlessly dark all at once. (She practised staring inward, she said, looking at the back of her head.) Her recorded voice--the only other "character"--repeats a rhythmic, rocking, incantatory lullaby, but the phrases stop short of monotony because of an almost musical diminution. The voice dwindles in volume in each of the four sections, becoming finally a breathy whisper. Parelleling this, W's breathing gets heavy and then labored; and each time she repeats "More" to restart the voice, she says it with growing dread, compulsion, ambivalence. So that the final "More" really sounded like "Please, no more." The voice continues its refrain about selves, others, aging, and dying in tones so varied that even

an untutored audience could hear the four uses of "down" (down into the rocker, down into the other self, down the stairs, and let down the blind--to signify death); the three possible meanings of "rock her off" (she's crazy--off her rocker, let's knock her off, and she's rocking off to sleep); and the two variations on "time she stopped" (it was time she stopped this, and this allowed her to stop time). There was audible shock from the audience at the "fuck life" line, and palpable sorrow when this aging, bitter woman in her glittering black lowers her head and dies.

Clapping was hesitant after Rockaby: no one wanted to make a mistake, no one wanted to break the mood. But when the reader in Ohio Impromptu says "Nothing is left to tell" and his right hand's descent is mirrored by the descending right hand of his listening double (Martin Beck), then the clapping began immediately--and more loudly than you would expect from a 40-seat house. This play about a story about a story-teller has the structure of a magical circle, the near humor of a self-referential children's song (like "My Name is Jon Jonson...").

Those familiar with their Beckett can recognize elements from Krapp's Last Tape (ironic non-mourning for a lost love). Eh, Joe (the hero's guilt haunting him), and especially Molloy (a messenger and a mission). Any theatre-goer can appreciate a reader reading about a reader, and a prompter rapping on the table to force the speaker to repeat a line with a new pace or intonation. Thus we have on stage a live rehearsal--a transposition of the director/actor relationship.

Alan Mandell's obviously impatient tone after each of Listener's interruptions and his racing through the repeated sentence caused quiet amusement in the audience, enjoyment which broke out as an actual chuckle when Mandell ventured to re-read an earlier page of his tome as the current story directs him. This production had more realism and humor, less other-worldly atmosphere, than the premiere version in Columbus, Ohio--partly because the men's two wigs here were shorter and greyish rather than long and white, and the table was more square and beige (raw, natural

wood) again rather than long and white. Thus the stark black/white visual effect that you get in some productions of Krapp and that we experienced in Columbus' Ohio was lost.

But Impromptu's table couldn't be a long one because the stage is too tiny; for the same reason, I think, Footfalls' steps were reduced from 9 to 7. Other differences also kept L.A.'s production from replaying either the Washington, D.C. premiere of Footfalls or the Columbus version. Gone forever, it seems, is the vertical shaft of light (representing the mother's room) that I found so effective on Washington's Arena Stage. Gone was the tall figure and stately gliding of the daughter in ragged and draped robes and an attitude of gaunt suffering, like Donatello's Mary Magdalene. Instead, Beatrice Manley wore a black lace shawl over a fancy grey taffetta dress, over mounds of petticoats that ruffled as she shuffled along. But "shuffled" isn't quite the word because her shoes (not rags or slippers) had taps on them, making the footfalls click. Costume alone would make this Footfalls less dreary, more spirited than others.

My hand compels me to use the word "realistic" here again for Mandell's portrayal of Beckett's mother/daughter relationship, because this production goes below the metaphorical being vs. non-being equation; it is not simply the dramatic enactment of Jung's theory about a woman not really alive because she was never fully born. When May asks if the mother wants a shot again or her pillows turned again, and the mother's voice (Bea Silvern) answers no since "it would be too soon," an angry emphasis on each "again" and "too soon" communicates hatred and resentment between the two. This hatred peaks in the interchange about whether or not Amy saw something unusual in Church. Here Beatrice Manley, skillfully creating both Amy and Mrs. Winter, clips her comments and drips them in sarcasm. What we witness is a down-to-earth family fight; so that when Amy victoriously reasons that she couldn't have seen anything unusual because she wasn't there, we feel--besides the eerie chill of her ghostliness--the vindictive spite of her "Top that, mother dear" retort.

At this L.A. "Three by Beckett" one could smile small smiles and think deep thoughts by turns. This evening of poetic playlets put the lie to a statement I overheard during a Happy Days intermission once:

Woman to her friend: "Well, are you enjoying the play?"

Man to his former friend: "It's Beckett; you're not supposed to enjoy it."

Susan Brienza

- Beatrice Manley performs *Rockaby* by Samuel Beckett, Los Angeles Actor's Theater, 1982. Director: Alan Mandell. Photographer: R. Goldengay